

IN THE SPECIFICATION:

Replace the paragraph beginning on page 1, line 1, and its heading appearing immediately above line 1, with the following rewritten heading and paragraph:

-- Cross-Reference to Related Application(s)

This application is a continuation-in-part of U.S. Patent Application No. 09/731,680, filed on December 6, 2000, which claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/174,466, filed December 30, 1999.

In parallel to that, this application concurrently claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/188,901, filed March 13, 2000. --.

Please replace the paragraph beginning at page 1, line 12, with the following rewritten paragraph.

-- The method and system in accordance with the invention is broadly advantageous for establishing an out-sourced merchandise return service. For convenience of terminology in this description, the party or business concern or receiving the out-sourcing business is termed the Service Bureau or at alternative other times, the Association Service. This Service Bureau predominantly is linked for communication by means of a computer-implemented server such as an Internet domain (for example, e-mail communication by an e-mail server) or even more preferably, a web domain (for example, web-page matter communication by a web domain). The party(ies) who are out-sourcing the merchandise return services may be referred to, needless to say, as merchandisers. More particularly, the profile of the representative merchandiser most likely to participate in this method of outsourcing return services includes the following characteristics. --.

Please replace the paragraph beginning at page 5, line 4, with the following rewritten paragraph.

-- Among other aspects and objects, there are, briefly stated, a secured exchange facility of the Service Bureau. The secured exchange facility has some features of escrow, except that the objects entrusted with the Service Bureau point-of-access associates are shipped to and fro by permission of the parties. The secured exchange utility of the Service Bureau promotes more assurances for buyers that they will have more leverage with sellers in cases of non-acceptable items. The secured exchange utility of the Service Bureau ought to promote the interests of sellers by bringing in more potential buyers into the e-commerce market. That ought to be an advantage of the seller community. If the market of buyers is bigger, then on-average the market for the seller's item(s) ought to get a better price. --.

Please replace the paragraph beginning at page 11, line 13, with the following rewritten paragraph.

-- The next tack of the point-of-return associate is to route the returned item according to the instructions gotten by the packing slip. These instructions might come directly from the e-tailer. Alternatively, the instructions might have been composed by the Service Bureau 44. The instructions might be unchanged from the moment the bar-coded packing slip was created during the fulfillment process. More preferably, since the instructions are likely to be downloaded over the Internet or web, then this affords the e-tailer, the Service Bureau, or both in cooperation with each other, to dynamically update the downloadable instruction set depending on changed circumstances. --.

Please replace the paragraph beginning at page 12, line 25, with the following rewritten paragraph.

-- With reference again to FIGURE 1, the Service Bureau 44 best services its populous community of e-tailers (eg., 14) and brick-of-mortar point-of-return associates 42 with a variety of association services. For instance, the Service Bureau might compile a set of quality standards on about every aspect of the operation. The quality standards might insist that the point-of-return

associates provide a clean and accessible store. That customer handling is speedy and affable. The point-of-return associates might be educated in diplomatic ways of handling irate customers, and not further fueling the angst. In respect of the e-tailers, they too must meet standards so that one or a few might not drag down the reputation of the community as a whole. Hence, the e-tailers are likely to be persuaded to the wisdom of a relatively relaxed return policy. If the criteria by which returns will be accepted is too stringent, then perhaps every customer attempting a return is going to be disappointed. To inform the public that there is an association and apparatus set up to facilitate returns, when in fact returns are seldom granted, is more likely to damage goodwill than to either build goodwill or just prevent its loss. Therefore, the return policies of the various e-tailers have to be in fact real and not illusory. --.

Please replace the paragraph beginning at page 13, line, 12, with the following rewritten paragraph.

-- Indeed, another role for the Service Bureau 44 is to draft a short list of uniform return policies. The draft return policies are available for adoption by the e-tailers. Indeed the e-tailers likely would be induced to adopt a return policy from the association's menu. The purpose behind keeping the variety of return policies down to a few makes sense with the point-of-return associates. They ought to be so familiar with each one of the return policies on the menu that they can instantly act on any policy before a customer and apply the return policy accurately. The purpose behind keeping the different available return policies uniform serves a lot of the same reasons. The point-of-return associates ought not have to read and study a closely written legal document in order to facilitate a simple return. It will bog down the return service, and be unpopular with both customers and point-of-return associates. Of course, one of the association's persistent tasks is finding balance between what effectively serves the e-tailer community against what effectively serves the point-of-return associate community. --.

Please replace the paragraph beginning at page 20, line 15, with the following rewritten paragraph.

-- The secured exchange facility of the service 40 can be modified by varying rules-of-the-service, as follows. Assume sender 50¹ agrees to send item 55¹ to receiver 50⁰ either for payment or exchange of item 55⁰, it not mattering which for the moment. After the agreement has been reached between the parties 50¹ and 50⁰, the use of the service 40 can work this way. The chosen point-of-access associate 42a of sender 50¹ is given a description of the item-to-be-sent 55¹, which description presumptively conforms to an acceptable model format established by the Service Bureau 44. A clerk of point-of-access associate 42a is authorized to use the description, which description is either given to the clerk in a certified form by the sender 50¹ or else downloaded from the service 40's web site 30, to use to make the following determination. That is, the clerk makes a determination if the item 55¹ is reasonably what it should be. The clerk's determination may be binding on the receiver 50⁰ to perform as obliged (eg., pay if payment was agreed upon), or else provisionally binding on the receiver to perform at least in part as obliged. Performance in part might include having the receiver 50⁰ pay in part (eg., to at least cover one-way or round-trip shipping plus a fee) else deposit its swap item 55⁰ with its chosen point-of-access associate 42b.

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